

A Demographic Study of National Orientation and Mobility Certified Instructors

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Abstract

This article is a descriptive study of the demographic and economic characteristics of National Orientation and Mobility Certified Instructors (NOMC). Although the NOMC credential was established in 2001, this manuscript is the first to provide a picture of this group of professionals. Data demonstrate that 97% of certificants who responded are currently employed; teaching mobility to children, adults, and senior citizens; and earning a median annualized salary of \$45,976. Other results and implications for practitioners are also presented.

National Orientation and Mobility Certification

National Orientation and Mobility Certification (NOMC) is a professional credential governed by the National Blindness Professional Certification Board (NBPCB) as an alternative to the Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist (COMS) certification offered through the Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Education Professionals (ACVREP). The foundation of this certification is rooted in Structured Discovery Cane Travel (SDCT), which is a term used to describe a specific model of orientation and mobility. This article does not attempt to highlight methodological differences between the approaches, but rather to describe the population of professionals who hold NOMC certification. It reports on a survey study that was conducted in the fall of 2009 to describe the employment patterns, demographics, and economic standing of instructors holding NOMC certification.

NOMC Certification: A Historic Overview

In order to provide an optimal understanding of the results obtained through this study, it is important to briefly describe some of the central milestones in the history of the O&M field that constituted the genesis of the NOMC certification.

The profession of the traditional O&M field traces its roots back to World War II, where Dr. Richard Hoover developed the skills to work with newly blinded soldiers. Bledsoe (1997) provides a comprehensive overview of the history of the O&M field, from its inception up to the mid 1990's. Because from the traditional O&M model one of the main requirements for instructors to ensure quality instruction was to be sighted, blind persons were historically not allowed to become certified to teach O&M. As a consequence, the organized blind movement created an alternative approach to the teaching of cane travel for blind persons to be able to teach O&M, and the Structured Discovery Cane Travel model began to flourish (Ferguson, 2007).

In 2004, the 29th Institute on Rehabilitation Issues (IRI) monograph was written to both provide an update on the evolution of the conventional approach of O&M training (Wiener, 2004) and to describe the methods and principles of SDCT (Altman & Cutter, 2004; Bell, 2004). Structured Discovery Cane Travel is defined as a model of the orientation and mobility field that is rooted in the Consumer Based Model of Rehabilitation (CBMR) principles (Bell, 2004). Therefore, it is grounded in the collective knowledge, experiences, and attitudes of the organized blind (National Blindness Professional Certification Board, 2008). Under the SDCT model, professionals teach individuals who are blind how to travel safely, effectively, independently, and confidently by using the long white cane and nonvisual alternative techniques (Altman & Cutter, 2004).

The beginnings of SDCT can be traced to the work of Dr. Kenneth Jernigan in his position of Director of the Iowa State Commission for the Blind from 1958 until 1978, who infused the philosophy of the organized blind, the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), into training. His work had significant impact on the field of rehabilitation, and was later adopted by the Nebraska Commission for the Blind where this alternative approach began to gain international notice. The terminology “Structured Discovery,” however, was coined by Alan Dodds, an English orientation and mobility instructor who in 1984 spent some time in the United States observing blind orientation and mobility instructors and acquiring training at the Nebraska services for the visually impaired. From this experience, he wrote the Nottingham report, in which he stated that “the whole mobility experience was much more in the vein of structured discovery learning, rather than the receiving of sighted wisdom at second hand” (Dodds, 1984, p. 6). Dodds (1984) observed that the students were both encouraged to assume an active role in the exploration of their environments and allowed to make mistakes in order to learn from them. He also identified many of the skills developed by the students under training as cognitive problem-solving skills, which were promoted by the instructors’ attitudes of encouraging the students to figure out by themselves possible solutions to different troublesome situations. He concluded that blind people can be effectively instructed in orientation and mobility by a blind instructor, who also serves as both a positive role model and a catalyst of positive attitudes towards blindness. Later, Mettler (1995) made crucial contributions to the development of the SDCT model by considering the Cognitive Learning Theory as a theoretical framework for the instructional methodology employed by blind instructors (Ferguson, 2007).

The SDCT model continued to evolve through the publication of “Techniques Used by Blind Cane Travel Instructors,” which provided the field with a practical approach to teaching O&M (Morais, Lorensen, Allen, Bell, Hill, & Woods, 1997). Specifically, this book describes the techniques and attitudes that blind instructors employ during the instructional process. Its contribution is mainly in demonstrating that the nonvisual techniques used by blind instructors are equally effective as those used by sighted instructors.

Although a substantial record in the literature existed to support the fact that skillful and properly trained blind persons can teach O&M, they were still faced with many obstacles in seeking to be hired to teach orientation and mobility. In view of this controversial situation, the organized blind movement worked to create a graduate program in orientation and mobility founded in Structured Discovery principles for teaching Cane Travel—later to be coined the Structured Discovery Cane Travel model (SDCT). This model, as described by Jernigan and later defined by Dodds (1984), Mettler (1995, 2008), and Morais and others (1997), is grounded in nonvisual instruction, problem solving, and attitudinal components. Therefore, it was designed specifically to prepare orientation and mobility instructors (blind or sighted) with mastery in nonvisual techniques, cognitive problem solving, and nondiscriminatory attitudes toward blindness (Ferguson, 2007). The graduate program was established in 1997 at Louisiana Tech University, in partnership with the Louisiana Center for the Blind. Because SDCT is rooted in a positive view of blindness and understands that instructors' personal beliefs about blindness will have tremendous impact on the student's expectations and self-confidence, these beliefs have a central place in Louisiana Tech University's graduate program (Ferguson, 2007).

Two years after the inception of the Louisiana Tech program, the National Blindness Professional Certification Board (NBPCB) was founded expressly to serve as the oversight organization responsible for the National Orientation and Mobility Certification credentialing process of individuals who were trained under the SDCT model of mobility instruction (Ferguson, 2007). The SDCT principles are reflected throughout the testing, continuing education, and recertification processes of the National Orientation and Mobility Certification (Ferguson, 2007).

National Orientation and Mobility Certificants (NOMCs) are professionals who teach O&M skills from the perspective of SDCT methods and principles (Ferguson, 2007). Instructors receive their training either from an apprenticeship conducted at agencies for the blind that employ SDCT or from the Louisiana Tech master's degree program. NOMCs are experienced blind or sighted instructors who have gone through intensive nonvisual training (i.e., under sleep-shades or blindfolds), who are confident in their own ability to travel nonvisually—and, at the same time—are able to monitor what his/her student is doing (Ferguson, 2007). In addition, these instructors receive exhaustive training in teaching problem-solving strategies (e.g., communicating travel concepts using Socratic questioning, and assessing student readiness to progress) (Altman and Cutter, 2004, Bell, 2004, Ferguson, 2007). Primarily, NOMCs have deep and strong beliefs in both the capabilities of blind people and the nonvisual techniques (Morais et al., 1997).

Over the past two decades, several research studies have been conducted that provide information about the demographics, employment characteristics, and

workload of professionals working from the traditional approach in the O&M field (DuPass & Fazzi, 1996; Uslan, Peck, & Kirchner, 1989; Welsh & Blasch, 1974; Wiener, 2004; Wiener, Fauver, & Schwartz, 1995; Wiener & Siffermann, 2000). There are also studies that have analyzed the situation of dual-certified specialists, those who hold both certifications: teachers for the visually impaired and O&M instructors (Griffin-Shirley, McGregor, & Jacobson, 1999; Smith et al., 2007). However, the publications on O&M instructors who hold the NOMC certification are virtually nonexistent.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to provide a picture of the professionals that currently hold the NOMC certification and to describe their work within the field of orientation and mobility services for individuals who are blind. Founded in 2001, the NOMC certification is less than ten years old and very little has been published about the population that holds this certification and their employment status and characteristics. Consequently, this study seeks to contribute by describing both the NOMC population and its employment status and characteristics. The review of the studies mentioned before has been useful in that it has helped to delineate the methodology to be implemented and, more specifically, to construct the operational definitions of the variables to be studied.

Method

Participants

The target population for this study consisted of approximately 55 NOMC instructors. Requests to participate in a survey were sent to the total population of NOMC-certified instructors that composed this population. Approximately 70% of them completed and returned the survey either online or by phone. The sample for this study consisted of 39 individuals who completed the survey.

Materials and Procedure

An online survey was created to capture participant demographics, work status, and employment characteristics. The survey instrument was checked for accessibility, and was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Louisiana Tech University. Participants were invited to complete the survey and informed that their participation was voluntary and that the data would be kept confidential. They were then contacted in three ways, which were (a) through mail out to their home address, (b) invitation to their e-mail address, and (c) posted on a listserv for NOMC-credentialed instructors. The invitation informed individuals that the purpose of the survey was to establish a demographic and economic record of NOMC-credentialed instructors. Participants were then

provided with two options for responding to the survey: (a) by direct access to the online survey or (b) by contacting the office of the PI where their answers could be obtained over the phone. Data were collected between October 15 and December 1, 2009.

Results

Demographics

Participants were an average of 41.6 years old ($SD=11.04$) ranging from 23 to 66 years. The sample represented 21 males (54%) and 18 females (46%), who were 26 Caucasian Americans (66.67%); seven African Americans (17.95%); three Hispanic Americans (7.69%); one Native American (2.56%); one Asian American (2.56%); and one individual reported being of another racial category (2.56%). Consequently, the total sample size was 39 respondents; however, due to missing data, the following results are based on data from between 36-39 respondents.

The NOMC certification was initially designed as an avenue for instructors who are themselves blind to become credentialed. Of the current sample, 27 instructors (69%) reported that they were blind, 10 instructors (25.64%) reported having unimpaired vision; and two instructors (5.13%) reported being visually impaired. Instructors were employed full-time in 17 different states.

In addition to the basic demographics of the NOMC instructors that composed the sample, the survey looked at three specific areas, including: (a) the type of O&M preparation and agency within which instructors worked; (b) the consumers with whom instructors worked, and (c) economic information about the instructor's job.

Professional Preparation

Of the sample participants, 23 instructors (59%) reported obtaining their training through university master's degree preparation; 13 NOMC instructors (33.3%) reported that their preparation for O&M training came through agency-based preparation; two instructors (5.13%) reported that their preparation for O&M training came from other sources; and one instructor (2.56%) reported obtaining O&M training at the bachelor's degree level.

Employment

Virtually all instructors were employed full-time, with the exception of two who were obtaining post-graduate training, and all of them held the NOMC certification. When asked in what type of agency the NOMC instructors were employed, the data for the remaining 36 demonstrated that 12 instructors (32.43%) worked in adult, residential training facilities for the blind; six instructors (16.22%) worked in other private/public training programs for adults; five instructors

(13.51%) taught on a contractual or itinerate basis; five instructors (13.51%) worked directly for non-profit, consumer organizations; three instructors (8.11%) worked at private or public schools with children/youth; three instructors (8.11%) worked at universities; and two instructors (5.41%) worked in non-residential training centers for adults.

Population of Consumers

Participants were asked about the population of consumers with whom they primarily worked: 31 instructors (79.50%) reported adults age 18-65 as their primary population; six instructors (15.38%) reported their primary working population as children; one instructor (2.56%) reported senior citizens as the primary population with whom they worked; and one instructor (2.56%) did not answer. Although three respondents were not working with students at the time of this study, they reported upon the population with whom they had worked previously. Participants were next asked if they worked with other populations other than their primary responsibility. Nineteen instructors (48.72%) reported that they worked with all populations; 12 instructors (30.77%) reported working with both children and adults; seven instructors (17.95%) stated they only worked with their primary population; and one instructor (2.56%) did not answer.

Community Setting

Forty-two percent (42%) of the orientation and mobility instructors worked in medium-sized communities (e.g., 60,001-500,000 population); about one-third of instructors (35%) worked in a small community (e.g., 60,000 population or less); and 24% worked in larger communities (e.g., over 500,000 population).

Workload

In attempting to understand a little more about the workload and expectations for students, NOMC instructors were asked about the number of individuals and amount of time spent providing direct instruction to consumers. Instructors reported working with an average of 4 consumers per day ($SD=3.68$), ranging from one to 12 consumers per day. On average, they spent 23 hours per week providing direct instruction to students ($SD=13.11$), ranging from 1 to 40 hours.

Use of White Cane

NOMC instructors were next asked if they personally used a white cane while providing instruction, and the vast majority (97%) responded that they did. The next question sought to ascertain the extent to which the white cane was used by consumers for O&M instruction. Of all instructors, 31 individuals

(79.50%) stated that consumers were always taught using a long, rigid white cane; three instructors (7.69%) stated that a cane is always used during instruction, but the type of cane is the consumer's choice; three instructors (7.69%) did not answer this question; one instructor (2.56%) stated that the consumer chose whether or not to use a cane, and the type to be used; and one instructor (2.56%) responded that a white cane is often not used during instruction.

Work Experience

Participants were next asked about their experience teaching and other job characteristics. The NOMC instructors reported having taught O&M to consumers for an average of 7.14 years ($SD=5.79$), ranging from nine months to 25 years of experience.

Earnings and Job Benefits

Finally, NOMC instructors were next asked about their earnings and job benefits. Participants reported earning an average hourly wage of \$31.43 per hour ($SD=\24.21), which translates to an average annual earning of \$65,353 ($SD=\$50,734$). In order to account for averages, the median income was also obtained. Data demonstrated that the median hourly wage earned by NOMC instructors was \$22.08, which translates into an annualized median salary of \$45,976. In addition to the salary earned, instructors were asked about whether benefits were provided along with their employment. Of the sample, 91% of instructors reported having medical insurance available to them through their place of employment, and 88.5% reported having dental insurance available to them through their work.

Discussion

For the first fifty years of the O&M profession there has been only one avenue for individuals to become credentialed to teach individuals independent orientation and mobility. While the profession has grown steadily over this time period, the field has continued to evolve and grow. Since 2001, the NOMC credential has entered into the field as an alternative avenue for O&M instructors. Specifically, this certification was originally designed as an opportunity for blind instructors to become credentialed.

The purpose of this study was to provide a picture of the professionals that currently hold the NOMC certification and to describe their work within the field of orientation and mobility services for individuals who are blind. With a response rate of approximately 70% of the total population, the outcomes present a complete description of demographic and employment variables and, therefore, offer valuable information about O&M instructors who have been instructed

under the SDCT model and hold the NOMC certification. Overall, the results obtained revealed that NOMC instructors were in their mid-forties on average (46.1 years old), primarily Caucasian (66.67%), and were more likely to be male (54%). Another finding was the fact that the majority of NOMC instructors reported being individuals who are blind (69%). This later outcome seems to be consistent with the original purpose of the creation of the NOMC certification, to give blind instructors the opportunity to become credentialed.

The main two types of O&M preparation were found to be agency-based preparation (33.3%) and university master's degree preparation (59%). However, earnings were found to be somewhat lower for agency-trained NOMC instructors (\$56,400) as compared with master's degree, NOMC-certified individuals (\$64,900). Concerning the instructors' employment setting, the analysis of the data showed that instructors worked in a variety of settings; however, they were mainly involved in adult, residential training facilities for the blind (32.43%), and only three instructors (8.11%) worked at private or public schools with children/youth. The majority of the instructors (79.50%) reported working with adults age 18-65 as their primary population. These data are consistent with the type of training that NOMCs receive, suggesting that teaching techniques are also based on a top-down approach.

One valuable outcome of this study is the finding that the majority of the instructors were employed full-time and received a median annualized salary of \$45,976. These findings are comparable to other related teaching/instructing occupations. Specifically, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics for 2008 demonstrated annual median earnings by occupation for special educators at \$49,500; rehabilitation counselors at \$32,900; and other teachers/instructors at \$35,150 (BLS, 2010). In addition, instructors reported that they worked with an average of four consumers per day and an average of 23 hours per week providing direct instruction to students. Regarding the instructors' experience in teaching, they stated having an experience, on average, of 7.14 years, suggesting that employed NOMC instructors hold a robust full-time occupation.

Finally, the data that show that 97% of the NOMC instructors used a white cane while providing instruction and 87.19% reported that consumers are taught using a long, rigid white cane, affirm the priorities of nonvisual instruction that underlie the NOMC certification process. These data are important because nonvisual instruction is a cornerstone of the SDCT model of orientation and mobility. While this nonvisual focus remains somewhat controversial, the data do support the premise that those individuals who are credentialed with NOMC do in fact provide instruction largely in a nonvisual format, which is a focal point of the credentialing process for NOMC instructors.

Implications for Practitioners

The findings of this study have several important implications for practitioners. Specifically:

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- The NOMC credential has been demonstrated to be a valuable credential, resulting in the majority of its recipients being employed in the orientation and mobility profession.
- Structured Discovery has evidenced success in providing a robust employment avenue for individuals who are blind, as well as those who are sighted.
- Vocational rehabilitation counselors and other professionals now have accurate information to provide to consumers interested in pursuing O&M as a profession who may wish to choose the NOMC credential.

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